

Post Colonial Conundrum in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana

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Life in this world is absurd. There is no place for feelings and emotions. After the two World wars, there is gradual decadence of moral values and ethics. Scientific inventions besides making life more comfortable make men self-centered and egoistic. The colonized countries freed from the clutches of their colonizer have caught between two worlds. People face identity crisis since they ape the culture of colonizers. The East-West encounter brings enormous changes in the attitude and behaviour of people. Quest for identity, moral code, alienation, fulfillment, pain and suffering are the traits of Post colonization. There is no moral fear and human values are drained. Modern man is not happy since he has the feeling of incompleteness. He is free from existential pain and anguish. Girish Karnad, one of the leading contemporary play wrights portrays the postcolonial conundrum in his Hayavadana.

Girish Karnad was born in 1938 in Matheran, in the southwestern Indian state of Karnataka, India. He took his B.A. from Karnataka College in 1958 and then went to oxford for graduate studies on a Rhodes scholarship. After his return in 1960s, he started writing for the Kanada theatre. Girish Karnad is an actor and has directed plays and films in several Indian languages. His plays Yayati, Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Naga-mandala, Tale-Dandle and the Fire and the Rain bring him the reputation of one among the great contemporary writers along with Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar. In his plays one can find a bend of traditional Indian folk and modern western theatre.

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana depicts the dilemma, pain and suffering of modern man. The play is based on a Sanskrit story from a collection of tales called the Kathasaritsagara and also on western writer Thomas Mann's 'The transposed Heads'. In the introduction to Three plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana and Tughlaq, Girish Karnad says:

I remember that the idea of my play Hayavadana started crystallizing in my head right in the middle of an arguments with B.V Karanth (who ultimately produced the play) about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre's relationship to music. The play is based on a story from a collection of tales called the Kathasaritsagara and the further development of this story by Thomas Mann in 'The Transposed Heads'¹

Human life is a mystery and the entire world is in conflict. This is well expressed in the opening scene of the play Hayavadana. Bhagavata begins the play with invocation of a song of Lord Vigneshwar. The irony here is Vigneshwar, the elephant God himself an embodiment of imperfection is prayed for the success and perfection of the play. In the city of Dharmapura, two youths namely Devadatta and Kapila are thick friends and wander in the city like Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama. (p. 74). Davadatta is comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence. Devadatta, the son of the Revered Brahmin is good at logic and love and has won the poets of the world with his poetry and wit. His bosom friend Kapila, the son of the

ironsmith, Lohita is dark and plain but daring and has no equal in physical strength. Though these two differ in intellectual capability and physical stamina, they have one mind and one heart.

Two friends there were
- one mind, one heart - (p.74)

Kapila is such a sincere friend who is even willing to leave his parents for the sake of Devadatta: Don't you know I would do anything for you? Jump into a well – or walk into fire? Even my parents are not as close to me as you are. I would leave them this minute if you asked me to. (p. 84). When Devadatta craves for Padmini, the daughter of leading merchant, it is Kapila who helps him to find out the where about and acts as a messenger to their love and marriage.

Even after Padmini becomes a better-half of Davadatta, Devadatta's friendship with Kapila is continued. Devadatta-Padmini-Kapila! To the admiring citizens of Dharmapura, Rama – sita – Lakshmana (p. 90) It is surprising that such a bosom friend Kapila loves Devadatta's wife Padmini. Padmini's desire to have the intellect of Devadatta and the steel body of Kapila shows the moral degradation of the society. A friend's wife is like a sister. But here Kapila's lust and Padmini's expectation depict modern men's craving for fulfillment.

Devadatta swores to sacrifice his head to Lord Rudra and his two arms to the goddess Kali in order to have Padmini as his wife. How can such a man share his wife with another man though he is a close friend? The doubt about his wife's illicit love gives him mental torment and anguish. M. K Naik observes:

Hayavadana presents the typical existential anguish, but does not stop at the existential despair.²

Devadatta's suspicion about his wife's fidelity is confirmed on seeing his wife's admiration of Kapila's broad back with muscles rippling across it. Devadatta blames himself for having failed to notice Kapila's manly muscles. He says: I was an innocent-an absolute baby and thinks that no woman could resist him – and what does it matter that she's married? (p. 96)

Modern man is destined to suffer from a kind of alienation. He alienates himself from fellow men and the society and confines himself in the self-created world of his own. Both Devadatta and Kapila suffer from self-alienation. Devadatta alienates himself from Padmini and Kapila and is unable to discuss his agony and pain with either Padmini or Kapila. On seeing Kapila and Padmini going to Rudra temple together, Devadatta bids Goodbye to them. He says:

Good-bye, Kapila. Good-bye, Padmini. May Lord Rudra bless you. You are
Two pieces of my heart-live happily together. I shall find my happiness in that. (p. 98)

Though he has promised his arms to Kali, he offers his head to her. Kapila's inability to live his life without Devadatta has left him with no choice except to fellow the foot stops of Devadatta. No, Devadatta, I can't live without you. I can't breathe without you. (p. 100). Kirtinath Kurtkoti says in his introduction:

The friends kill themselves and in a scene hilariously comic but at the same time full of profound dramatic implications.³

Devadatta becomes jealous of Kapila and tries to postpone the journey to Ujjain because he doesn't like Kapila's presence. Since Padmini insists upon the trip, there is no other alternative for Devadatta. For Kapila entire world has become wiped out without Devadatta and Padmini. No doubt both Devadatta and Kapila are morally weak. Their suffering is due to their inability to find their identity in a triangle love relationship. Kirtinath Kurtkoti observes:

Karnad's play poses a different problem, that of human identity in a world of tangled relationships.⁴

Padmini mixes the head and the body of Devadatta and Kapila so that Devadatta's mask goes to Kapila's body and vice-versa. This implies her inner urge to have a man of Devadatta's intellect and Kapila's strong body. Shubangi Raykar observes:

One must choose one's course of action and then accept the consequences unflinchingly. But if understood as a deliberately chosen one, Padmini's act is ultimately a consequence of the social norms imposed on her. Since she cannot have both Devadatta and Kapila, she tries to get past the norms by having what she most wants from each of them.⁵

Unfortunately Kapila with Devadatta's body also claims her. The quarrel between Devadatta and Kapila regarding the possession of Padmini clearly depicts the incompleteness of human life. Devadatta argues that according to the Shastras, the head is the sign of man so one who possesses the head of Devadatta is Devadatta. But Kapila's argument is that since she has married Devadatta's body with the holy fire as her witness, she belongs to him. Human beings search for perfection and completeness is well portrayed.

Devadatta and Padmini have gone to Dharmapura but Kapila stays in the forest. Now Devadatta with Kapila's body has won people in the wrestling match. But this lasts for some time only. Padmini frankly says she likes the manly smell of Kapila's body. By applying sandal oil in his body, Devadatta's body becomes softened and he gradually loses his virility. As a Brahmin he follows the family tradition of daily reading and writing. He says: It was fun the first few days because it was new. All that muscle and strength. But how long can one go like that? I have the family tradition to maintain – the daily reading, writing and studies. (p. 166).

In the same way Kapila who has a soft Brahmin body finds it difficult to lift an axe but he has won at last after a war between his head and body. Padmini's inability to accept human incompleteness and disharmony is the result of all this chaos. M.K. Naik makes a comment on Padmini's attempt to transpose the heads.

Padmini's plight suggests woman's vain attempt to unite man as intellect and as flesh in order to further her creative purpose. But these two aspects of the masculine personality are basically at war with each other and hence the attempt ends disastrously in destruction for woman and man integration cannot be achieved by trying to reconcile but by accepting cheerfully the fundamental disharmony in human life.⁶

Padmini realizes the failure in the transposition of heads. Devadatta's body loses its muscle and strength and is transformed into a soft Brahmin body. Like Padmini, there are several modern emancipated women who have the desire to love their husband for one

thing and admire another man for different thing and thereby they make a mess of their life. V.B.Vinod observes:

Padmini's predicament is the predicament of a modern emancipated woman in our society who is torn between two polarities, a woman who loves her husband as well as someone else for two different aspects of their personalities. Devadatta and Kapila's friendship obviously evinces out their fascination for the aspect, which, each of them lacks.⁷

After sending Devadatta to Ujjain fair to buy new dolls for her son, Padmini comes to Kapila with her son. Her arrival forces Kapila to dig his uprooted memories. She reminds him the spilt between his head and body which almost he forgets all these days. Kapila is disturbed by these memories and consider them as mad dance of incompleteness.

Kapila: I had buried all those faceless memories in my skin. Now you have dug them up with your claws.

Padmini: Why should one bury anything?

Kapila: Why shouldn't one? Why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness? (p.126)

Kapila painfully narrates to Padmini the trouble he has undergone with Devadatta's body. Having known the betrayal of Padmini, Devadatta has come to forest in search of her and Kapila. Though their dual and death appear to be melodramatic, that clearly indicates the absurdity of life. Devadatta and Kapila decide to find the solution for their problem through death. Even death could not separate these friends.You knew death. You died in each other's arms. You could only have lived ripping each other to pieces. I had to drive you to death. (p. 131)

It is an irony that like a pativrata, Padmini performs sati, leaving her son to Bhagavata. Her son also suffers from identity crisis and for him the issue of biological father is a complex one like Salmon Rushdie's protagonist in 'Midnight children'. Padmini says to Bhagavata:

My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in the forest and tell them it's Kapila's son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and trees. When he is 5, take him to the Revered Brahmins Vidhyasagara of Dharmapura. Tell him it's Devadatta's son. (p. 131)

In the subplot, Hayavadana, the son of princess and a white stallion has the same problem of identity. Hayavadana's mother, the princess of Karnataka chooses white stallion and not the Prince of Araby as her husband. This is an evidence for the mystery

of human character. Hayavadana has a man's body but a horse head. Hayavadana wants to get rid of his horse head. When Bhagavata says whatever is written in our forehead cannot be altered, Hayavadana laments:

But what a forehead! What a forehead! If it was a forehead like yours, I would have accepted anything. But this! ... I have tried to accept my fate. My personal life has naturally been blameless. So I took interest in the social life of the Nation – civics, politics, patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, the socialist pattern of society.... I have tried everything but where's my society? Where? You must help me to become a complete man. (p.81)

When he prays to Kali for completion, She makes him a complete horse instead of a complete man. But still he retains his human voice. Hayavadana suffers without any fault of his own. R. S Sharma observes:

Completeness is a humanly impossible ideal as suggested first in the story of Hayavadana and later in the transposition of head.⁸

Padmini's son lacks natural child's joy and laughter, fails to communicate with anyone and is passionately attached to the dolls. This boy breaks his barrier and laughs only on seeing the laughing horse, Hayavadana. After listening to the tragic song of this boy, Hayavadana also attains completeness by getting the horse voice i.e. neighing. The completeness which is not possible with human beings is attained by the horse, Hayavadana.

Bhagavata is the commendator of the play. Like chorus in T.S Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral' he reports significant events and developments of the play. The dolls throw light on the inner thought of the characters by their discussions. Padmini's infidelity is brought to light by their description of a person who is not her husband she perceives in the dream. Veena Noble Dass comments:

The opening narration of Bhagavata quickly introduces not only the characters, the background and the essential rudiments of the plot but also the central dilemma of the play which is Padmini's dissatisfaction with human limitedness.⁹

All the three characters – Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini are existential sufferers. Their death emphasizes the 'meaninglessness' of life. Modern man's frustration, God's indifference, quest for identity, eagerness to achieve completeness and human joys and sorrows are well depicted in the play. Girish Karnad has meticulously used myths and folktales to touch upon all significant issues of postcolonial era.

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